

Electorate sees House's vote on corruption cases as sign of a parliamentary process gaining momentum

Giving credit when and where it is due

The decision of the Lower House of Parliament to forward nine cases of corruption for investigation and possible prosecution was not only the natural course of events but also served as an opportunity for the members of the House to vindicate themselves to an extent from harsh criticism for over their performance on the floor. **P.V. Vivekanand** reports:

AMMAN — In the wake of last week's decision by the Lower House of Parliament to refer nine cases of possible corruption to the judicial authorities and seek more details on dozens of others, some of the main questions that are raised among the voters are: Are the deputies finally doing the job expected of them? Was it the right way to approach the issue? How serious are the people's representatives in pursuing the issue of corruption and financial mismanagement? Is there a ceiling to what the deputies can achieve?

Having secured the mandate of the people in the Nov. 8 elections, the deputies have been finding themselves at the receiving end of harsh criticism from all corners for "not being able to achieve anything solid for the people," for "focusing attention on marginal issues" and for "overlooking the promises they made to their constituencies." Hard-hitting words have appeared in the press and also came in some Friday sermons at mosques as well as a few underground leaflets (manshurat). Against this background, many observers and voters see the House's move last week to expose possible cases of corruption in official circles and initiate the process of bringing the guilty to justice as a long-awaited attempt by the deputies to ex-

onerate themselves, particularly by bringing out an issue which is seen by many as a major contributor to the Kingdom's present economic ills.

"Every one knows that someone, somewhere had always embezzled a lot of money in major projects this country has seen in the past two decades," commented Ali Mahmoud, a downtown grocer. "This was always assumed

by the citizenry prior to the parliamentary elections and the democratisation that followed. An average man with a basic awareness could have guessed the culprit in most cases, but no-one could do anything about it except perhaps discuss it in private..."

"Now the situation has changed," he said. "Our deputies have seen to it that the door is open for prosecution of those responsible and we no longer have to look over our shoulders everytime we discuss

it." Abdullah Hussein, a service taxi driver, agrees with this line of thinking and believes the deputies deserve praise, but finds fault with the way the House handled the entire affair. "They should not have decided to discuss the issue in a closed session," he said. "Why did we vote them in? To have their own secrets and possible deals, and continue to keep us in the dark until such time they feel we are mature enough to understand?"

"I do not agree with it at all," he added. "I believe that I have a right to know who was responsible for forcing me to work 16 hours a day to make my ends meet. I used to work for 10 or 12 hours a day and take a decent income home,

and of course if, legal proceedings are launched to punish the guilty?"

"Goal is served"

Dr. Mahmoud Mazen believes that the House was right in opting for a closed session on corruption. "After all, what do we want? To ensure that the guilty are punished, isn't it? That ultimate goal is being served now, without the deputies having to go through the process of 'throwing mud' at some people who might be guilty only of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Our country is small, and insinuations are more than enough to damage anyone."

"Let the authorities investigate," he said. "Let them come up with concrete proof against the people actually involved in corruption and financial mismanagement. We have waited for so long, and let us wait for sometime more before speculating and spreading rumours that a certain official took bribes for a certain project. For all we know, we might have the wrong people in mind and there will be no way for most people to disassociate them even if investigations point the finger at someone else."

"The deputies have done their job," he added. "They have started a process, and it is up to the judiciary and executive authorities to follow it up and ensure that justice is carried out."

"Democracy in full"

Dr. Khalil Abu Hussein from Zarqa insisted that all investigations and related sessions of Parliament should be



CONSULTATIONS IN THE CORRIDORS... Members of the Lower House of Parliament, despite their ideological and political differences, appear to be united in reasserting their clout and proving to their constituents that they are indeed the legislative

authority through bringing out the thorny but sensitive issue of corruption in public institutions and referring nine cases to the judiciary for investigation and possible prosecution (Photo by Youssef Al 'Allan)

open to the public. "We are a democracy and democracy should be practised in full," he said. "Why the guess work, if the deputies will eventually speak and the information will be spread until it becomes rumour? Whom will it serve?"

Abu Hussein, an unsuccessful candidate in the Nov. 8 elections, however, expressed satisfaction over the work of the House's Financial Committee, whose report was the key document which was studied by the House in its secret session last week.

Youssef Masri, 26, an accountant, saw the outcome of the House session as positive, but said: "Since the information from the session was leaked — and it was clear that it was bound to — it would have been better if the debate was held in public."

A student of politics, who preferred anonymity, said the House committee had done a "good job, considering everything." But, he said, "the very fact that the vote in the House (in favour of referring nine cases to the judicial authorities) was 76 against four tells me something; that the government fully supports the House's move. It also means that the information on which the House committee based its report was made available to it by the government. That's a very healthy sign."

He reasoned that the government, through its various ministries and departments, "could have very well withheld vital information from the committee if it wanted to do so. Obviously, that was not the case. It is clear that the government is as keen as the House to clear things up and cooperate with the legislative authority in seeing it through."

But a former senior official at a government ministry who also insisted on anonymity, disagreed. "How do we know all related information was passed on to the House committee?" he asked. "The process could have very well been selective."

"I'd suggest that the House hold its next session in public and request members of the public who may have information to step forward and help the investigation," he said.

"For all we know, the testimony of a security guard at a certain project site can be the key to some mysteries related to that project, and help determine who was responsible for what," he added. However, he conceded that he was not underestimating the efficiency of the deputies to separate "the grain from the chaff."

Some people interviewed by the Jordan Times felt that corruption trials should be held in public.

An unemployed youth, who insisted be identified only as Omar, said he did not believe that the "entire truth will be brought into the open."

"There will always be some 'wasta' working behind the scenes," he said. However, he

"It is a difficult question," said Hassan Abu Suleiman, a schoolteacher. "It is true that some of the deputies appeared to be seeking the limelight on the floor rather than doing something creative. But with raising the issue of corruption and mismanagement and succeeding to come up with at least nine cases they seem to be on the path towards vindicating themselves. At least no-one can question their sincerity now."

"To be sure, one cannot distinguish between the work of the Financial Committee and the House in general simply because the man on the street doesn't care who did the actual job as long as the issues are brought up and handled in

immediate access to Parliament proceedings, secret or otherwise, even before the deputies leave the Parliament building."

But are the deputies doing their job in the right way? "Well, I guess so," answered Maha Zweidan, an office secretary. "The changing times in our society and life are in fact the mostly widely discussed subject among my group of friends. The obvious conclusion we come up with is that the deputies have limitations simply because they do not have the power to accelerate the executive bureaucracy. They can only make strong recommendations and suggestions, but they are helpless when faced with red tape. So, what they did, in terms of focusing on corruption and raising cases, is very commendable."

The course of events from this point is "no longer the responsibility of the House," argues Jamal Abu Jarrar, a leftist political activist. "What (the deputies) have done is to expose possible corruption and leave it to the judiciary to launch legal proceedings wherever needed. But if the judiciary fails them, they could not be blamed."

Leading columnist Tareq Masarweh appeared to echo the same sentiment. Writing in the Al Ra'i newspaper, the only Arabic-language daily to publish some details of what went behind the closed doors of the House Tuesday, Masarweh paid tribute to the deputies and the Financial Committee of the House for their "courageous attack on those who thrived on corruption."

The House's move to refer nine cases of corruption to the prosecutor general, he said, comes in line with the "effective participation of Parliament in maintaining an untainted political life in the country."

"The corrupt should pay the price," he wrote. "We should introduce laws that deal with economic crimes. They should be tough against all elements who find their way into government through middlemen. Public servants who thrived on corruption in the absence of control should be questioned."



A POINT OF ORDER... Members of Parliament have been finding themselves the target of harsh criticism from the electorate for "focusing their attention on marginal issues" and "overlook-

ing their promises" to their voters. But last week's move by the House to expose corruption has helped them, to an extent, vindicate themselves (Photo by Youssef Al 'Allan)

Discord

(Continued from page 1)

On economic justifications for the government's position rejecting more tax exemptions, Jarrah said that income tax in Jordan remained low compared to other countries in the region and low compared to income from custom duties.

He added that the Kingdom's budget deficit, which he said would be widened by the exemptions, "is the basis of economic imbalances and is linked to imbalances in the balance of payments."

The minister stressed that "ostracising this deficit has an extreme priority because it is the cornerstone for improving the basis of the Jordanian economy, creating a proper investment climate, boosting exports and returning capital into the country."

Jarrah's report drew mixed reactions from deputies and a conclusive vote could not be taken on any of the proposed amendments.

The House then voted in favour of reducing tax exemptions for university students from JD 1,500 to JD 1,000 as a compromise between the government and the committee.

The eight-hour session came to an end after deputies discovered there was no quorum to keep the session in progress. The House decided to resume discussions of the income tax law Monday.

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